

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT**  
**TOWN SELECT BOARD**  
**SPECIAL MEETING**  
**Minutes of December 5, 2019**

- I. ROLL CALL.** Select Board Chair K. David Maxwell, Board members Lynn Doney, Julie H. Goodrich, Kenneth W. Goslant, and Nathaniel Miller. Also present were Town Manager Jeff Schulz, Finance Director Laurie Baroffio, John Helfant (Chief, Northfield Police Department), Lawton Rutter (Chief, Northfield Ambulance Service), Victoria Fielding (EMT, Northfield Ambulance Service), Scott Bagg (EMT, Northfield Ambulance Service), Brandon Gallant (EMT, Northfield Ambulance Service), Jim Wilson (Northfield Community Development Network), Carolyn Stevens (Northfield Community Development Network), Sally Davidson, Charles Morse, Steve Davis, Dan Sivori, and Elroy Hill.

Chair Maxwell called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

- II. PLEDGE OF ALLIEGENCE.** The Board members and the public were asked to rise and recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

- III. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (Scheduled):** None.

**IV. BUDGET WORK SESSION**

- a. Northfield Police Department (NPD).** Manager Schulz said NPD Chief John Helfant is present tonight to go through the proposed FY 2020/2021 NPD budget. It was noted most line item amounts in the "Personnel Services" budget are set by the newly-approved NPD Union Contract. The contract provides for a first-year 3.5% increase in full-time NPD officers' salaries and benefits. Chief Helfant said the budget for the initial costs of state-reimbursed special details has been reduced from \$8,000 to \$0 because NPD no longer is on the approved list of police departments taking part in such programs. Chief Helfant has requested an increase in the part-time officer budget from \$4,000 to \$10,000. Two (2) of his full-time officers are in the National Guard and both are expected to be deployed for one-year hitches in the near future. One plus is that the part-time officers will make less per hour than the full-time officers they will be temporarily replacing. Board member Miller asked about a new line item for "Delayed Reporting OT." Chief Helfant said this line item is due to a change in the new contract. Previously, when a full-time officer could not make an evening shift due to illness, vacation, etc., another officer had to be brought in from home to fill the shift. Now, a swing shift officer can work an additional 3.5 hours at time and a half to fill the shift. Finance Director Laurie Baroffio said the initial amount for this line item (\$2,880) is a rough projection based on past actuals. There is no way to know the exact figure until this has become regular practice. Manager Schulz said there was no requirement to set up a separate line item for this but it was thought best to do it for better tracking of NPD overtime expenses. Chair Maxwell noted the line item for NPD overtime has been reduced from \$30,000 to \$25,000 in FY 2020-2021. He asked if this was appropriate due to apparent overages in the current fiscal year budget. Manager Schulz feels the new contract should result in significant reductions in NPD overtime so this probably is accurate. Chair Maxwell wants to avoid the current situation so this matter may be revisited at a later time.

Manager Schulz noted NPD "Contract Services" expenses will remain about the same in the next fiscal year with a couple exceptions. The budgeted amount for "Maintenance Contract" will increase from \$4,000 to \$4,500. However, Chief Helfant has received new information since this budget was drafted so this might actually go down. The company that performs software maintenance for the NPD fingerprinting machine will no longer do so due to its outdated version of Windows. The machine was purchased some time ago with grant funds so the NPD will use it as long as it remains functional. After that, they probably will revert to taking fingerprints manually. The budget for "State Records Mgmt." will increase from \$5,500 to \$6,500 based on past actuals.

The line item amounts in the NPD "Administrative" budget will remain about the same. The amount for "Radio Repair/Maintenance" will increase from \$500 to \$1,000 as a fallback measure in case one of the radios goes down. The amount budgeted for "School/Training" will remain at \$3,500. Manager Schulz asked how much of this amount represented state-mandated training. Chief Helfant said about half. The rest involved courses for officer advancement and learning new skills. He noted much of the mandated training is now online so officers don't have to travel back and forth to the Police Academy as much as they used to. The NPD budget for "Materials/Supply" is about the same but there are slight increases for electricity, heating fuel, and gasoline. Board member Doney asked about the difference between the "Uniform Allowance" in the "Personnel Services" budget and the "Uniform" line item in the "Materials/Supply" budget. Ms. Baroffio said the first reimburses the officers for professionally cleaning their uniforms and the latter is the actual purchase of uniforms for each officer. Manager Schulz noted the line item "Building Maint/Supplies" will increase from \$2,500 to \$3,000 based on past actuals. Chief Helfant confirmed the Police Station is in good shape though the interior walls might need repainting in the next couple years.

Moving to the NPD Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) budget, Manager Schulz noted the "Building Improvements" budget has a \$4,666.12 balance. An additional \$1,000 will be added in FY 2020/2021. Chief Helfant said the building's exterior now is in good shape after some work done this past year. In the NPD Capital Equipment Plan (CEP) budget, Manager Schulz noted the big expense items are vehicles, computers, and body cameras. Chief Helfant felt the 2014 Ford Explorer should be replaced in the next fiscal year as it has high mileage and requires regular repairs. Board member Goslant noted the vehicle is scheduled for replacement during the current fiscal year (2019/2020). Ms. Baroffio said a previous Select Board made the decision to budget for the replacement of only three (3) NPD vehicle even though a fourth vehicle was retained as a backup. Chief Helfant believes the NPD should have four (4) vehicles on hand in case one goes down for repair, etc. It was noted the 2017 Ford Explorer was badly damaged last week in an accident. Board member Goslant asked if the vehicle could be salvaged. Manager Schulz thought this unlikely. Ms. Baroffio noted our insurance company will provide much of the replacement cost. Chair Maxwell said the subject of NPD vehicle replacement will need to be revisited at a later time when more information regarding the municipal share of replacing the 2017 Ford Explorer is better known. He also feels with the current complement of full-time officers, it makes sense for NPD to have a four (4) vehicle fleet.

As for the "Computers" budget, Chief Helfant said there are a number of outdated desktop computers in the Police Station. Personally, he would like to move away from having desktop computers for each full-time officer and instead provide them with just laptop computers that can be used both in the office and on the road. There now are six (6) laptop computers so two (2) more would be needed. Part-time officers could share a laptop by creating separate profiles. Two (2) desktop computers would be retained in the dispatching and processing offices but the rest could be junked. It was noted \$1,000 was budgeted for NPD computers in FY 2020/2021 and this is sufficient.

There is a \$4,800 balance in the "Radio Replacement" budget with no new funds budgeted for FY 2020/2021. Chief Helfant said all the radios are in good condition so replacement probably won't be needed in the short term. Ms. Baroffio will look at projected replacement costs and as a result might plug some number into the FY 2020/2021 budget in order to keep this account active.

Chief Helfant said seven (7) Tasers were purchased in the current fiscal year through a five-year payment plan. Therefore, no action is needed for this account. He then noted two (2) of the current Axon 1 body cameras are not functioning and a decision needs to be made soon whether to have them repaired or instead purchase new Axon 2 body cameras for all the full-time officers. The newer model is matched to the individual officer and will turn on automatically when the Taser is deployed. Purchasing Axon 2 body cameras for all seven (7) full-time officers would cost \$5,593.

Chief Helfant said an Axon 3 model is available but he doesn't feel its added benefits justify the additional cost. Chair Maxwell would like an estimate for the cost of repairing the Axon 1 body cameras before any decision is made. Chief Helfant will provide this. Board member Goodrich asked if it were necessary to replace all the old body cameras at one time. Chief Helfant thought it best to have all the officers working on the same system. Chair Maxwell asked Ms. Baroffio to tentatively add this \$5,593 into the NPD CEP budget. Along with vehicle replacement, this matter will be revisited before the Select Board members provide final approval to the proposed NPD budget.

Chief Helfant then noted the Wal-Mart Foundation has a community grant program that provides funds for local police departments. He plans to submit an application for the maximum amount available, which is \$5,000. If the application is successful, the grant funds could be used to partially offset the costs of purchasing new body cameras, laptop computers, etc. Chair Maxwell wished Chief Helfant good luck with this and thanked him for the valuable information provided tonight.

- b. Northfield Ambulance Service (NAS).** NAS Chief Lawton Rutter began his presentation by addressing the "Personnel Services" budget, which he believes is the most important NAS issue tonight. He said he began making changes in the NAS staffing model a couple years ago in response to similar modifications in neighboring ambulance services as well as steady increases in the number of NAS callouts and the expansion of its coverage area. NAS now receives about one thousand (1000) calls for service each year. Chief Rutter said many communities transitioned to a 24/7 professional ambulance service once the eight hundred (800) threshold was reached but he is not advocating for this at this time. However, there are significant problems relying on part-time EMTs to provide coverage, especially over the summer months when the Norwich University (NU) students who provide so much assistance the rest of the year are gone. Chief Rutter said in the NU students' absence, he relied heavily on one EMT who was able to work a large number of hours. He would like to aggressively address this problem by hiring a second full-time NAS employee (in addition to himself) rather than rely solely on part-time volunteers. A line item has been added to the NAS "Personnel Services" to accommodate this new position but no funds have been added to this account. Board member Goslant asked why NAS has such staffing problems. Chief Rutter said other regional ambulance services are paying EMTs more per hour and providing more guaranteed paid hours. He added there is big competition for trained EMTs in the Central Vermont area. In addition, other ambulance services are attempting to increase their revenue streams by charging more for paramedic intercepts and perhaps start charging for mutual aid responses. Board member Goslant wanted confirmation that NAS EMTs now are being paid \$13 per hour and Chief Rutter is asking for a new full-time position that would pay \$17 per hour with benefits. Chief Rutter said that was correct. He also is asking for the EMT per hour wage increased to \$15 and for an increase in the compensation for nighttime and weekend standby.

Chair Maxwell asked how many full-time and part-time NAS employees there are at this time. Chief Rutter said he is the only full-time employee and the current roster of NAS part-timer employees is forty-seven (47), which includes twenty-one (21) NU students. He added some part-timers are more active than others as several have full-time jobs elsewhere or also work for other emergency services. Manager Schulz asked how the current level of staffing compares to previous years. Chief Rutter said the non-NU student number of local EMTs has declined. He added that campus outreach efforts has provided a steady flow of NU students to help fill shifts while school is in session. In addition, many NU students stay in the Northfield area after graduation and continue to serve on the NAS. Board member Goslant said he had concerns when the NAS coverage area expanded to include Brookfield, etc. that NAS might be overextending itself in regards to available manpower. He suggested perhaps cutting back on the NAS coverage area if personnel issues cannot be resolved. Chair Maxwell asked if there was any thought to increasing NAS callout charges or per capita rates to bring in additional revenue. Chief Rutter said the NAS rates were increased for various services and medications this past year and he felt there was no need for additional rises at this time. In addition, NAS probably will have a new billing agent in coming months so Chief Rutter doesn't want any rate adjustments during this time of transition.

Chair Maxwell asked what would be the total increase in the NAS operations and maintenance (O&M) budget should all three (3) of Chief Rutter's recommendations be adopted. Manager Schulz estimated the increase at about \$102,000. He added the NAS personnel budget already had a 6.6% increase factored in prior to these new proposals. Chair Maxwell has no objections to raising NAS per hour rates to match those for regional ambulance services. Board member Goslant asked if the budget as first presented would be sufficient to operate the NAS as in previous years. Chief Rutter said it would but warned the personnel issues he discussed earlier would have to be addressed sooner rather than later. Increasing the hourly rate alone could help with NAS volunteer retention but the more profound systemic problems should be resolved within the next five (5) years.

Chair Maxwell noted increasing the EMT hourly wage from \$13 to \$15 would add about \$8,000 to the proposed FY 2020/2021 budget. It seemed a "no-brainer" to him that it was necessary to keep NAS pay competitive with other ambulance services in the region. However, creating a new full-time position is a "hard sell" and much more discussion and hard data is needed before such a decision can be made. Board member Miller asked if callouts to the NU campus contributed much to the NAS high call volume. Chief Rutter said it does add up but not as much as in past years. He said callouts to the NU campus and local senior care facilities are steady but the major increase has been callouts to the general population, which is growing older and becoming more prone to household accidents, chronic health problems, etc. Chair Maxwell said the Select Board consensus appears to favor increasing the hourly wage and consideration of an on-call stipend for evening and weekend service. However, he would like to see a five-year plan in writing to justify creating the new full-time position. With salary and benefits, it is estimated this would add \$75,000 to the NAS personnel budget. Chair Maxwell feels a strong case would be needed to justify this additional expenditure.

In the "Contract Services" budget, Chief Rutter said a four percent (4%) increase in dispatching services (i.e., Capital West) is expected in the next fiscal year and this is anticipated in the proposed budget. As indicated earlier, Chief Rutter said an increase in what Barre Town Ambulance changes for paramedic intercepts is being considered. Chief Rutter suggested one way to keep this expense low was to have at least one of the two (2) NAS paramedics on standby during high demand periods. Chair Maxwell would like a full discussion of ways to lower the annual paramedic intercepts figure, which is now at ninety-five (95). This includes about sixty (60) times when NAS itself transports the patient to another agency. In the "Ambulance Billing Services" line item, Chief Rutter hopes there might be some savings in this account should a newer, less expensive vendor be hired. The RFPs for this service are due back by January 10, 2020.

Scott Bagg has been a NAS volunteer for over twenty-five (25) years and is one of the aforementioned two (2) NAS paramedics. He noted he must work shifts at another ambulance service in order to maintain this certification. Mr. Bagg said having a paramedic on scene is very helpful in a number of situations even when not strictly required. He felt Chief Rutter should go through the training himself to become a paramedic as he is more than qualified. The main problem is the time away and training expense. Chief Rutter said another drawback would be that (like Mr. Bagg) he would have to put in hours at another ambulance service to retain certification.

The NAS "Administrative" budget is about the same except for an increase in the "School/Training" budget from \$4,000 to \$4,500. The "Materials/Supply" budget also is about the same next year except for modest increases in the "Gasoline/Diesel" line item (\$7,500 to \$8,000) and "Department Supplies" (\$3,000 to \$3,300). The "Equipment Purchase" line item, which was created for the current fiscal year, will decrease from \$1,500 to \$1,000 based on actuals to date.

In the NAS Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) budget, there is a \$7,286 balance in the "Building Improvements" line item with an additional \$500 budgeted for FY 2020/2021. Chief Rutter noted this account only covers the part of the Town Garage that NAS occupies. The only anticipated expense for this account in the near future would be the possible replacement of one or more of the overhead doors.

In the NAS Capital Equipment Plan (CEP) budget, Chief Rutter noted two (2) ambulance unit chairs are scheduled for replacement in FY 2020/2021 and sufficient funds have been budgeted for this cost ( $\pm \$6,730$ ). He still recommends that a least one PowerLoad stretcher be purchased in the next fiscal year. The current plan is to purchase one when the 2014 ambulance unit is replaced in FY 2022/2023 and a second in FY 2026/2027 when the 2017 ambulance unit is replaced. Chief Rutter believes the PowerLoad is a vital piece of safety equipment because it reduces the chance of EMTs suffering back and other injuries when heavy patients are loaded into the ambulance unit. He noted it is possible part of the purchase price ( $\pm \$27,000$  each) could be offset if an occupational safety grant application to the Vermont League of Cities and Towns (VLCT) is successful. The grant maximum amount is \$5,000. Manager Schulz noted the next round of applications for VLCT grants is in January 2020. He currently is planning to submit an application for funds to purchase a posthole digger for the Highway Department but other VLCT grant opportunities will open later in the year. Chief Rutter still believes NAS should have a PowerLoad sooner than now scheduled. It has been said the trend towards increased obesity in the general population makes this a growing concern.

Chief Rutter then thanked the Northfield Ambulance Volunteers, Inc. (NAVI) for their recent fundraising efforts that resulted in the purchase of a new trailer at no expense to the municipality. The old trailer is kept on the NU campus and will be employed as a backup as long as it is usable. Chief Rutter added NAVI does several fundraisers throughout the year including the now-ongoing Christmas Tree and Wreath Sale. Chair Maxwell then thanked Chief Rutter for the important information provided tonight as well as his excellent work throughout the year.

**V. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION (Unscheduled).**

- a. **Elroy Hill: NAS Budget.** Mr. Hill feels Chief Rutter is an exceptional and perhaps indispensable municipal employee and he is concerned about what would happen to NAS should he leave his position. Mr. Hill supports funding the second full-time NAS position as a safeguard against this undesirable possibility as Chief Rutter would have the opportunity to train a potential successor in proper NAS procedures, etc.
- b. **Victoria Fielding, Northfield EMT: NAS Budget.** Ms. Fielding is a NAS volunteer and she also supports the hiring of a second NAS full-time employee. She personally has seen the problems arising during summers and holiday breaks when NU students aren't around to help fill shifts. It is often hard for non-NU student volunteers to fill the gap because many work full-time jobs in other towns. Ms. Fielding also felt some major events, such as the fatal train accident earlier this year, require the presence of a second ambulance unit on scene and having this second full-time employee would facilitate this. This person also could provide proper supervision when Chief Rutter is on vacation, etc.
- c. **Dan Sivori: NPD Overtime.** Mr. Sivori asked if NPD officers are required to notify Chief Helfant of their vacation plans in advance so coverage can be properly planned in advance and thus limit the amount of overtime hours. Manager Schulz confirmed this is a requirement but he doesn't know how far in advance the officers must submit their plans. Mr. Sivori asked if it were possible for NPD to contract with outside agencies to fill shifts when needed at a lower cost than NPD overtime rates. Manager Schulz said this option has been brought up during past NPD union negotiations but has always been a non-starter with the officers and thus never included in the approved contracts.

**VI. ADJOURNMENT.** Motion by Board member Goodrich, seconded by Board member Miller, to adjourn. **Motion passed 5-0-0.**

The Board adjourned at 8:47 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

*Kenneth L. McCann*

Kenneth L. McCann, Acting Clerk

An audio recording of this meeting is available in the Town Manager's Office.

These minutes were approved at the regular Select Board meeting of January 14, 2020.